

# Why the United States Should Fund International Demographic Research

Since the passage of the Government Performance Review Act of 1995, U.S. government agencies have faced increased pressures to justify their activities and funding decisions. Government-funded research is no exception. One area of study whose rationale has faced skepticism from some quarters is international demographic research. Demography is the study of trends and patterns in fertility, mortality, marriage, migration, retirement, and health, as well as the factors that determine and are affected by these variables. The majority of funding for international demographic research comes from government sources. Why, some ask, should U.S. taxpayers underwrite the study of problems abroad when America has so many domestic issues to tackle? How can research on foreign countries have any relevance to U.S. concerns?

A journal article by RAND researcher Narayan Sastry—"The Importance of International Demographic Research for the United States"—confronts these questions. He argues that international demographic research benefits the United States in a variety of ways. In particular,

- cross-national studies yield important insights for U.S. domestic policy;
- studies of demographic change abroad can serve vital U.S. strategic and commercial interests;
- assessments of overseas programs can enhance the effectiveness of U.S. foreign aid; and
- international research advances science by enabling unique studies that could not be carried out in the United States.

## INSIGHTS FOR DOMESTIC POLICY

International demographic research yields insights for U.S. domestic policy development that cannot be gleaned

from research and analysis focused on U.S. populations alone. In some cases, as in the four examples below, policy insights emerge *only* from cross-country analyses. This is because often the only source of variation in certain key factors, such as social security and retirement policies, is between countries rather than within a single country.

*The aging workforce.* The United States faces serious challenges associated with the aging of its population. By 2025, 20 percent of Americans will be older than 65, compared with only 13 percent in 1996. The pressure that aging places on social security systems is compounded by a decline in retirement age. Other industrialized countries have faced a similar one-two punch: employees leaving the labor force at younger ages, while the health status and life expectancy of retirees continue to improve. Recent cross-national research on 11 industrial countries showed that lower ages of pension eligibility combined with taxes on earnings past retirement age encourage early retirement. Therefore, raising the benefit age, as well as changing tax policies on such benefits, can relieve pressure on the system.

*Infant mortality.* Relatively high infant mortality in the United States (a rate of 6.55 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1997) places the country 21st among large industrialized nations, almost 50 percent higher than that of Japan or Sweden. Cross-national research offers insights into the reasons for this poor performance. Given the high level of spending on health care in the United States, high rates of infant mortality suggest problems with access to health care and in applying care appropriately. Comparative research has indicated that the United States can make gains by improving access to prenatal and perinatal care.

*Child care.* Research from the United States in the 1980s found that nonmaternal child care had negative developmental consequences for children. However,

international comparisons, especially between the United States and Sweden, first revealed that an important reason for the U.S. findings was the poor quality of child care in the United States, rather than because nonmaternal child care was always bad. These findings provided support for U.S. welfare reform by easing concerns about sending mothers to work.

*Immigration.* Research abroad can illuminate social and economic conditions that influence migration to the United States. For example, a study using data from Mexico showed that Mexican immigration is most influenced not by the lure of American jobs but by family and social networks that sustain migration, by previous experience immigrants had of living in the United States, and by Mexican families' need to accumulate capital and diversify their sources of income. This suggests that immigration policies focused exclusively on narrow economic solutions (such as raising the costs and lowering the benefits of illegal migration) will be less effective than those which also address the social and structural issues that influence decisions to cross the border. Without Mexican data or an understanding of the Mexican economy and society, it would not have been possible to study this issue.

#### **ADVANCING U.S. ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS**

International demographic research helps U.S. policymakers understand issues of vital interest at home and abroad. Research has shed substantial light on the relationship between economic growth and demographic change. This connection has important trade implications for the United States. Developing countries can provide new markets for U.S. exports and also become important sources of imports to the United States. The emergence of a large middle-class population in even relatively poor countries, such as India, is an example of a key demographic change that presents important new trade and commercial opportunities for the United States.

Furthermore, an understanding of how demographic change affects social and political stability can help the United States anticipate international conflict. Relative population sizes and differential growth rates can alter the actual and perceived power of one group versus another, thereby leading to tensions. Research suggests that differing population growth rates constitute an underlying source of conflict in many places affecting U.S. interests, including Quebec and the Middle East. Furthermore, there is evidence of connections between high population density and psychological stress and violence. There may also be a relationship between environmental scarcity and civil conflict: Resource depletion and environmental degradation may emerge from large population size and rapid

population growth rates. Research in this worthwhile area is just beginning.

#### **DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND FOREIGN AID**

International demographic research can enhance the effectiveness of U.S. foreign aid. New performance measures devised by researchers have helped aid administrators use their funds for the greatest effect, whether through programs for immunization, school-based health services, HIV/AIDS prevention, or other services. For example, the Global Burden of Disease Study, undertaken by two demographers drawing on demographic methods of research, found that pregnancy complications were the largest single cause of death and disability for women 15 to 44 years of age. Although safe motherhood has been a priority for several organizations since the mid-1980s, few countries had specifically devoted resources to it. The Global Burden of Disease Study helped promote new, cost-effective maternal health programs, particularly for emergency obstetric care.

Family planning is another area where research has contributed substantially to foreign aid program improvements. It has done so by encouraging the use of new contraceptive methods and new strategies in developing countries. In pointing to new strategies for family planning programs, international research has enhanced the effectiveness of family planning aid and guided nascent programs. For example, research in the Philippines showed that providing additional methods in clinics increased participation in family planning activities.<sup>1</sup> This specific lesson for the Philippines—that more options can make family planning more appealing—has wider implications for those seeking to increase the effectiveness of family planning programs.

#### **GAINS FOR SCIENCE**

International demographic research affords opportunities for scientific research and advancement that are unavailable in the United States. For example, population registers in Scandinavian countries provide exceptionally reliable data on mortality and population counts at advanced ages. These data, more accurate than those available for the United States on similar populations, show that death rates at even the highest ages have been declining rapidly in the past half century. This suggests that life expectancy will continue to increase, affecting the

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<sup>1</sup>Renee Samara, Bates Buckner, and Amy Ong Tsui, *Understanding How Family Planning Programs Work: Findings from Five Years of Evaluation Research*, Chapel Hill: N.C.: EVALUATION Project, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina, 1996.

United States in many ways, particularly on pension and geriatric care issues.

Population research overseas can also provide uniquely effective study settings. Research based on data collected overseas can provide a more cost-effective way to conduct clinical trials and demographic surveys for topics of international and domestic interest. Research over the past two decades in Matlab, Bangladesh, has provided experimental data that would have been impossible to gather in the United States. These data have shed light on the effectiveness of immunization, family planning, and other health initiatives. The Matlab program's success in developing new treatment for diarrheal disease in particular has helped save the lives of more than one million children annually and has direct uses in the United States.

## **INTERNATIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH DEPENDS ON GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**

The government plays a primary role in supporting international demographic research. This role is unlikely to change. Although foundations provide some funding for international demographic research, their support can only complement public funding. There is, in addition, essentially no private-sector support for international demographic research. Consequently, government support is necessary to achieve an optimum level of funding. Researchers also benefit from government funding because it helps focus their work on topics of public concern and provides a relatively stable funding environment. Stable, long-term funding in turn helps attract and retain talented researchers, which is essential for high-quality research.

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